

# Cartoon Dreams, Book One: Theft of the Garter

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Summary: A story set within the "Changeling: the Dreaming" game line of the World of Darkness, which incorporates adapted versions of characters from animated movies and television such as Ruby Gloom, Coraline, Jimmy Two Shoes, Ahh! Real Monsters!, How to Train Your Dragon, Ed Edd & Eddy, Hey Arnold!, and several more. Adapted from an actual game and rewritten into first-person prose form.

## 1. Chapter 1: Partying and Parting

**\*\*Book One: Theft of the Garter**

**>Chapter 1 Partying and Parting<strong>**

We begin our tale in August. August 17th to be specific, a Saturday.

As every Saturday I've been at Heloise's repair shop, a place where I've been picking up a lot of extra hours lately thanks to all the extra free time I've had throughout the summer. Figured this was a good way to get a little extra spending cash, as well as impressing my mentor, Heloise the nocker. She's a well respected inventor amongst the local faerie courts and I'm lucky to have been taken on as her apprentice, even if it is a lot of tough work. After all the long hours I've managed to save a small wad of cash but haven't a clue for what to spend it on yet. Until I do decide, I've kept the extra income secret from my parents, who would almost certainly toss it right into my college fund.

Anyway, today is out of the ordinary only because Heloise herself has barely shown her face all day, and I've been forced to practically run the shop myself. Which isn't impossible, just a pain in the ass, but still better than getting on my boss' bad side. I happen to know Heloise keeps a collection of devices designed to deliver scientifically-exact quantities of misery, and I would prefer never to be on the receiving end of one.

As the sun sinks towards the horizon and I start to close up shop in the last thirty minutes before the end of my shift, Heloise finally emerges from the back rooms to speak with me. She is wearing her typical form-concealing burgundy robes, a more comfortable version of the garb reserved for those rare days when she isn't laboring on something in the workshop.

I immediately notice that Heloise isn't her usual self; her eyes are bloodshot and droopy, and she's carrying an ice pack kept pressed against her head. Loud noises from passing traffic on the street makes her wince. And to my changeling senses, even Heloise's *\_fae mein\_* is faded and worn out looking, her skin paler than usual and the fire in her eyes dimmed.

"Hey," she mutters. "Thanks for watching the shop today. I was almost going to close the place completely. Least we weren't busy."

"Sure thing, Heloise," I reply. "Umm... you want anything?"

"Hair of the satyr that bit me," she says, speaking freely as long as there are no mortals around to overhear.

My face quirks into an unsure expression. Though Heloise can be sarcastic, sometimes she is very literal and serious. But she doesn't seem particularly vindictive, at this moment anyway, so I shuffle towards a nearby freezer to grab something refreshing for her. "I haven't seen you this worn out in a while. What are ya workin' on?"

Ever observant, she spies my action and bids me do otherwise.

"In the office," she instructs. "In the desk there's a bottle of tequila. That'll do for now. *\_Uhhggg...\_*"

I obligingly fetch the beverage as well as a shot glass. Meanwhile she goes on, "This isn't from overworking; it's from overdrinking." She casually waits for me to pour her a shot. "Well, both."

She fondles the glass as I slowly fill it, continuing at the same pace as my pouring. "I finally finished a big order this week, so last night I decided to have a little celebration."

I give her a smile and a sidelong expression. "This doesn't look like 'a little' anything."

Heloise rarely does anything 'little'. I think it's to make up for the diminutive body that nature blessed her with. She is quite short, has pale blonde hair with highlights of honey yellow in them, and greyed blue eyes. Her body is always concealed under her work clothes (well, robes), so it's difficult to describe her apart from "short". But you could say her face is rather pretty, being smooth skinned and with a cute little nose. But then again, it's a face that can grin pretty evilly when she wants to. The scar on her forehead contributes to her intimidating qualities (I have no clue how she got it).

"I had a standing invitation to Castle Sapphire, which has weekly parties while the summer court is in session..." she explains.

I'm still fairly new to the world of faeries but I know enough to recognize the name of one of the Sidhe's nearby freeholds, though

I've never been. "I did some work designing traps for the dungeon when it was built, and they've been trying to get me to party with them ever since. Normally I was too busy, or I'd just make an excuse cause I'm not much of a party girl, but, eh..." she slugs down a shot, and shudders as the spirits slip down her throat.

A few stray strands of her blonde hair fall out of place, dangling in front of her face. She smiles weakly, and pays them no mind. "Anyway, I finally took them up on their offer last night. I had no idea what I lightweight I am..."

"Sounds like fun. But surely there was more than drinking?"

"Oh sure. Lemme tell ya, the sidhe spare no expense when it comes to showing off for their party guests. There was music, and food, and dancing, and performance art, and games of croquet played with flamingos instead of mallets... that last one might have been after I'd had a couple drinks."

From what little I have learned of the sidhe, this lavishness doesn't surprise me. The sidhe are the ruling fae among the changelings of Earth, and the most celebrated too. Beautiful, rich, and often famous. Appearances and social status are of great importance to them, so as you might imagine their galas are quite a spectacle. Feast and festivities, costumes and pageantry the likes of which you've only ever dreamed about, if you're lucky.

Fun until you take it that one step too far, like my poor boss just experienced firsthand.

"I was actually having a really fun time. Until I passed out."

I sit down in a chair across from her and lean back. "Did they send you home, or did you crash there until morning?" I'm more than slightly interested, this being the most exciting thing to happen to either of us all summer.

"I..." Heloise has to stop and think for a moment, which apparently requires a good deal of effort. "...woke up here in the workshop, so I guess someone took me home."

She's not quite being literal here, but it makes sense to me; Heloise doesn't actually live in her workshop, but it does contain the entrance to a trod that leads directly to a small house in the Dreaming where she actually does have a bed and a kitchen and all the other living amenities. It's in a place called 'Miseryville' somewhere... she's never offered to show me around. But more than once I've come in to work on Saturday morning to find her snoozing on her workbench in the back, so even that short trip is sometimes too much hassle when she is in the grip of a creative fit of invention.

Speaking of inventions, finding the concept of the party interesting but her details about it not as vivid as I could hope, my mind wonders to her 'big order' this past weekend. While I've been minding the shop for the past few months, Heloise has been keeping this job completely under wraps. Even from me, her own apprentice. "Do you always get hammered after completing a project?"

Whether because of the hangover or the tequila she was currently

downing, or just because the project was finished, Heloise was no longer so secretive.

"This wasn't just any project, I worked really hard on it. At first it was another enchanted trinket for a noble, this one in the form of a frilly lady's garter. The nobles are always trying to upstage each other, so it's not surprising to get an order for one built to enhance the wearer's sex appeal. So I based the design on the girdle of Aphrodite."

"Ooh," I coo, indeed interested. "Was it difficult?"

"Not in theory, but I'm much more practiced at working with metal. Lacy froo-froo underwear isn't really my thing. So it was a bit tricky to work all the little mechanisms into a piece of clothing and still keep it comfortable."

Heloise takes the bottle in hand and gets off her stool, leading me into the workshop. I've worked there many times before, but I don't typically approach Heloise's private draft board unless invited, such as right now. Her work area was big enough to comfortably work on something... about the size of standard consumer car. The walls bore a few dozen tools, were adjoined by numerous workspace surfaces, and a ready supply of mundane power-tools tucked neatly in the corners. It had a worked-in-regular-use feel, but was fairly tidy. The only personal item I'd ever seen was a small framed photo on a tiny desk in the corner.

Pinned up in front of a messy semi-stack of blueprints is a clearly ancient bit of yellowed parchment, looking like it something swiped from the the sketchbook of a renaissance architect. The parchment bears an illustration of the Cestus, the original girdle forged by Hephaestus and worn by the goddess Aphrodite.

"I also had to scale down the design, which worked out since the cantrips I have access to are nothing near the magnitude of the original," Heloise goes on, lifting up the scattered papers and looking around for something. "I used silver-thread for the wearer's grace, and crystallized moonlight sewn into the weave for a veil of mystery, and I had to get imported ... uumm... from the satyrs of... uhm. Hmm. Where is it?"

Heloise sweeps the messy drafting board clean, then hurries over to the nearest workbench overturning tools and pulling open every drawer within reach. Screws and wrenches and nuts and drill bits scatter through the air as Heloise rampages around in a panic.

"\$&#!" Heloise barks, loud enough that she winces in pain from the sound of her own voice. Her face grows increasingly frustrated and worried. "Mother-#&\*\$-fuckking-dog-&^\$#!"

"What? What is it?" I ask by way of placating her, knowing she can really cuss up a good streak when she's agitated. However all she does is growl loudly in frustration for an answer. Taking a second to think, it clicks. "... wait, you mean you ... oh." I stammer, quickly realizing that she has lost the garter itself.

I quickly begin looking with her, checking every nook and cranny and crevice in sight, and soon drop to the floor looking under desks and tables and peering into dark corners. Heloise continues to cuss and

fume, but it is futile. The girdle is not there.

"Ohhhh no." Heloise moans, slumping to the floor in defeat. "Cliff, do me a favor and shoot me now. Just put me out of my misery."

"Wait," She pauses, and takes a swig straight from the bottle she holds. "Okay, now shoot me. Use the blunderbuss we keep next to the safe."

"Hang on Heloise. Let's think." I sidle close to her, until my knee is touching hers. Close enough to grab the bottle away from her if I need to. "It's not here, Heloise. Someone or something took it, and I'm betting I know when." I grab her by the shoulders (albeit gently) and look closely into her face, meeting the gaze of her metallic blue eyes.

"Huh?" she picks up her eyes level with mine, ready to listen.

"I think someone from the party must have taken it, probably when they brought you home. You didn't... happen to tell anyone at the party about this invention, did you?"

"It's kind of a blur," she begins, but realizes that isn't helpful. She offers a weak, shamed smile. "It's also possible someone took it before I arrived here." She pauses and then adds. "I kinda... took the garter to the party with me."

"I suppose someone could have followed after you were dropped off too-." I begin to say, before this registers. "Whaaat..." I drawl, unable to keep the shock out of my voice. "Why?"

"I needed to test it! To make sure it was working correctly!" Heloise offers up as an excuse. "And there's this guy, whose attention I was hoping to catch..."

She hangs her head and buries her face in her arms. "And now I can't even remember if he flirted with me or not."

From within her arms, she half moans. "...But that doesn't even matter now because I'm DEAD without that garter! I'm supposed to hand it over to the client at the end of the month!"

"... and you can't make another in that time?" I ask.

"IF I work around the clock, AND I had more of the very select components I used in its construction."

She huddles into her arms more. "And he paid up front!" Heloise bemoans. "I already spent that money, I can't even give a refund!"

Undaunted, I stroke my chin in thought. "Well, if you really don't think making a duplicate is an option, why don't we try to find it? Surely you've got something around here good for searching, and if not, SOMEONE has to have a good cantrip for finding lost things."

Within her arms, Heloise's head twitches, and I can almost hear the gears of her thoughts clicking into slow motion.

"Maybe, hmm..." Heloise stops to consider this idea. "I could key it to respond to the lodestone buttons..."

She tugs on her robes and ponders her options for a minute. "This might not work, if whoever grabbed it was smart enough to conceal it with an illusion spell. That could mess my tracker right up. But it's worth a shot."

"...But I need to at least TRY to make a replacement. If I skimp on some of the more exotic parts I could still turn in a mediocre product. Which means I won't have time to hunt around town looking for the thief."

Her eyes twitch as she thinks of the details of construction. I know she dislikes making less than premium work, but in this case she'll have to set her pride aside.

"But you! Cliff, YOU could take on searching for the lost garter?"

Heloise is starting to look a smidge better now that she has a glimmer of hope, though she's still quite worn. I give her an impulsive hug as a token of solidarity. "Sure. How can I refuse a quest from my mentor?"

"Urk!" The diminutive nocker grunts, the breath squeezed out of her by my trollish hug. Sometimes I forget my own strength. "Okay, thanks, you can put me down now."

"I'll do my best to find it, Heloise." I assure her in a more serious tone, after releasing her.

"I'm gonna need to get some rest before I can whip up a tracking device for you," Heloise says, her mind already devising what such a gadget might look like. She stalks off towards the center of the room, stepping over a fairy ring disguised to look like a manhole cover.

"Go ahead and lock up, and head home for tonight. But swing by here tomorrow at sundown and I'll see that you're properly outfitted for this quest."

Heloise performs a spirited tap dance upon the fairy ring, upon the completion of which the floor disappears from under her and swallows her up in a flash, transporting her off to her domain in the Dreaming. She's tired and fatigued at the moment, so her movements weren't the most graceful I'd seen from her. It's strange to see your dour, grumpy boss dancing, especially tap dancing, but the funny thing is... Heloise is actually pretty light on her feet. Go figure.

Now alone in the shop I do as she has bid, closing up the store, and head home on the little gas-powered scooter that I own. The exterior of the shop looks just as I expect it to, and none of the other stores downtown are anything new or different. There is the usual assortment of fashion shops, book markets, restaurants and trinket stores on this street, which sees a fair bit of traffic but thankfully isn't in the downtown city core.

The trip home is pleasant. I pass through a portion of the city of Ashland as I go; it's a cozy little town nestled in a valley between some fairly steep hills and wooded mountains, and for the past three years it has been home. And it does have its attractions. There's a small mall with a cinema & arcade, a public park, a robust theater community and even a "Mystery Shack" on the outskirts of town. And that's just what the mundane world has to offer. My trip home takes me by within view of a spot of magical interest: Castle Sapphire. It is one of few faerie freeholds I'm aware of in the valley, and easily the most powerful. Not surprisingly, it's the stronghold for the local Seelie court. To human eyes, the castle appears as a gated community on the west side of town, the part of Ashland with the high property values where the wealthiest families live. My route doesn't actually take me through that neighborhood but the tall gothic spires and minarets are impossible to miss even blocks away.

Castle Sapphire is also where Heloise went partying last night. For the most part the denizens of the Castle let the fae of the city do as they will, stepping in only to keep the peace and address troublemakers, and host regular parties to dole out favors of course. Our community is ruled by a Sidhe noble family that I've never met in person, members of house Dougal. Seeing the collection of rich modern looking houses clustered together in a literally gated area, I recall my times there, and know I may visit there again soon on my quest to for Heloise' lost item.

I've been to the castle twice, first after my Chrysalis for my saining (where I took the name Rax) and once when Heloise formally took me on as apprentice. Both occasions were handled by a member of the royal retinue and not one of the noble family themselves though. It was really more of a bureaucratic hassle, since I was not of noble blood there was no cause for a celebration and those of higher station are busy people I suppose.

Riding away from the bustling center of town, up into the hills and nearing the crest of what might be considered civilization, I have a lovely view of the city nestled in the Ashland valley. Soon though the view shifts and the area is out of sight as I really head out of the city. As I get farther out to the homesteads tucked into the countryside there's more and more trees I'd probably get lost if I hadn't worn the route so many times already.

The trip home is uninteresting and mostly uninterrupted, at least until I pull up to my home, the "Pink Palace" Apartments. I am surprised to see a large van idling in the parking lot, the rear doors open to accept the last few cardboard boxes being loaded into it. Rumbling to a halt on the dirt driveway of my home, I tilt my head and survey the scene.

"Careful dear!" calls out Ms. Spink, making her way up from her downstairs apartment. "Some delicate pieces in that one!"

I turn my scooter off, and walk it over to where the aging redheaded stage actress is standing. "Hello Ms. Spink. What's going on?" I ask, gesturing to the van.

"The van's come to load some of our old props up to take into town," she says with a glassy-eyed smile. "For the show, you know. Be a good boy and lend a hand, would you? There's a toffee in it for you."

Ms. Forcible comes shuffling up the stairs after locking the basement door behind her. "Is it still not finished?" she asks. "Surely we didn't have THAT many costumes left after all these years."

I oblige the elderly ladies, finding an unloaded box still waiting to be packed away. But I'm dubious of their promised candies; my sister told me they are as aged as the two geriatric actresses.

"So you'll be gone for the weekend or something? What show?"

"Oh didn't I tell you? Perhaps it was your father I was talking to. You look so much like him!" Ms. Spink laughs, pinching my cheek before I can dodge her. "Miriam and I are lending our venerable theater experience for a production that's being put on."

It's at this point that I realize that the two old ladies are far too feeble to have been loading boxes, or even driving by themselves. A young woman with deeply tanned skin and large gold hoop earrings is putting boxes into the back, and nearly finished. Her limbs are thin enough that the boxes couldn't be all that heavy.

Interested, I take a step towards her. "Hey, wants some help?"

"Knock yourself out," she shrugs. There are only a couple boxes left but I am able to easily lift them into the back, where the young woman stacks them for transport. When the job is done she pauses and says, "Thanks. You coming to the show?"

"Oh heavens no!" Ms. Forcible interjects. "The young Mr. Jones here is a minor, we'd be shut down if we were caught letting him in! Ho ho ha!"

I immediately wish the two older ladies hadn't answered that.

"Oh, too bad," the island girl says, her expression mostly neutral. I look the girl up and down a few times, wondering if she might be performing in this mystery show.

"Lu, help me in would you dear?" asks Ms. Spink, and Lu comes around the side of the van to help the elderly woman climb inside and find her seat.

While she's occupied I have a minute to observe her surreptitiously. Lu is blessed with long legs and slender arms, toned by frequent exercise and tanned by a great deal of time in the sun. In the heat of August it's not unusual to see people wearing little, but Lu seems to be accustomed to wearing practically nothing; on her feet are loose sandals and a tight pair of cut-off denim shorts hug her compact little backside as she leans into the van. A forest green tube-top wraps around her bust, which is probably only a C cup but looks larger because of her thin skeleton. A set of jangling bracelets match the gold hoops in her ears.

Curious about her age, if I had to guess, I'd estimate Lu to be 18 or 19... she has a rather youthful face at least. But I am sure Spink and Forcible wouldn't allow a minor to perform in their show if they won't allow minors to attend it.

The view of her short brown form is very delightful, and I find

myself struggling for something witty to say. The best I'm able to come up with is, "Are you performing in this show...?"

"She will if we can get to rehearsal on time!" says Forcible. "Get the lead out April!"

Lu herself barely noticed my question, and I feel compelled to take another misguided swing at getting this exotic young woman to notice me. "Uhmâ€¦ That's a lovely tan you have, Miss Lu."

"Thanks, golden brown tones this nice are hard work," Lu agrees, though she is still preoccupied with Spink's bulk.

Forcible seats herself in the passenger side seat and at last the two elderly ladies are ready to go. Lu climbs in over Spink and I catch sight of a small tattoo on Lu's lower back, a decorative green oval about the size of a can of soda, more or less. Lu makes her way into the driver's seat and starts the vehicle.

I walk over the driver side window. "Take care ladies," I bid the two older women. "Nice to meet you. See you around," I say directly to Lu, smiling at her amiably.

"Fur sure," she drawls, gives me a friendly but dismissive wave, and drives the van off down the road into town.

I watch them go for a second, before turning back to put my scooter safely away. My thoughts linger on that tattoo for a few seconds, then to the rest of the fetching island girl's body, as I head inside. She doesn't even know my name, yet I can't help but replay the brief meeting over and over in my brain as only a teenage male could. Hopefully something will distract me soon before this gets embarrassing.

## 2. Chapter 2: Bumps in the Night

**\*\*Book One: Theft of the Garter**  
**>Chapter 2: Bumps in the Night<strong>**

With my scooter stowed, I head inside my family's quarters occupying the ground floor of the Pink Palace. I'm greeted by the familiar sounds and smells coming from the kitchen, telling me that dinner is just about ready. Inside my father is lazily reading junk mail and my mother is putting away the last of the cooking supplies. Seeing that I've arrived home she leans out into the halls and cups a hand around her mouth.

"Coraline!" she calls, "Wash up and come to dinner!"

After washing up at the sink I return to my seat just in time to see my blue-haired younger sister bound down the stairs and spring into the room, full of her typical energy.

She's thirteen now, three years younger than myself, though she isn't filling out as quickly as she might like. Mostly she's just had a bit of a growth spurt that gave her kind of a gangly appearance, knobby knees and unimpressive boobs. Not that I'd pay attention to that sort of thing of course. She's also blessed with curiously natural blue hair. The doctors tell us this is a rare but not impossible genetic

anomaly, but my best guess is that this is a visible sign of the trace amounts of faerie blood she possesses. The same gift that allows her to remember supernatural happenings as they truly were. Most humans have their memories of the faerie world quickly dissolve into mist once they return to their mundane lives. She remembers everything. Her entire adventure in the Other-World and where she met her Other-Mother, and every other brush with the Dreaming since. She's regaled me with the details of her adventure in great detail, and actually taught me more about magic than I've taught her. Even though I'm a changeling and she's only "kinain" (that is, a blood relative to a fae with more than the usual dose of faerie blood), she got a head start over me. While I was still clueless about my true nature she was getting lessons from a local tomcat. It makes sense if you've met him.

"What are we having?" Coraline asks as she sits across the table from me. Mom makes her way around the table spooning out portions.

"Carrots and broccoli and sage pork chops," my mother answers.

"Hey son, how was work?" my dad asks casually.

"Oh, not bad. It was a pretty quiet day for business," I answer my father, starting in on the meal

"Hi sis." I greet my favorite sister, smiling at her across the table. Of course she's my only sister, but that doesn't mean she isn't still my favorite. I mean, she still borrows my things without asking first and still has never learned to knock first before entering a room, but yeah, still my favorite. I like her confident straightforward attitude and honesty, but she also likes to laugh and have a good time when she can. It's pretty infectious sometimes.

Dinner proceeds as usual, making pleasant chat about nothing much. My parents needlessly remind me that I have gardening supplies to stack out in the woodshed (how could I forget when they keep reminding me?) and Coraline mutters something about homework to avoid being roped into the chore as well. The meal is filling and tasty, the conversation lighthearted and cordial. Afterwards I help mom with the dishes. Such is the mundaneside to my existence. Not everything is exciting fantasy and adventure—plenty of it is the cosy and boring life of a middle class white boy living in small town Oregon.

After finishing my chores and getting washed, I'm quite ready for bed. I'm going to have to begin my 'quest' properly tomorrow after all. My mind keeps flitting back to that attractive young woman Lu though, much as I hate living up to stereotypes of how a teenager behaves. I can't help it though, and I attempt to listen for the downstairs neighbors in hopes of bumping into her again. I have no idea what might come of it beyond more awkwardness, but hope springs eternal. Unfortunately the neighbors actually do stay out fairly late, and eventually I give up and head to bed. Nestled in the sheets, just as I am drifting off, a sound wakes me up, coming from upstairs. The skittering of mice is accompanied by feminine shrieks and stomping feet.

The sound rouses me thoroughly. A girl? Upstairs with Mr. Bobinsky? Surely this is madness.

Then I remember. I've always known Mr. Bobinsky to be a fairly quiet neighbor, the athletic foreign man remarkably light on his feet despite his size, which is fortunate since he lives right above my bedroom. But a couple of weeks ago Mr. Bobinsky left to take his performing mice on the road, and shortly thereafter subletted his one-room apartment to his niece. I hope this noise isn't typical for her, or she might end up costing me sleep.

I'd heard her name in passing, but I haven't spoken with her or gotten a decent look at her yet. Vaguely I can recall being told she's a history student, working on her research thesis at the nearby university. That's probably why I haven't seen her yet: she spends most of her time studying alone or at the library in town.

I decide I should go see what's going on. If Mr. B's left any of his mice behind, I feel a small sense of obligation to protect them. Also, a tiny portion of my mind worries whenever I see or hear signs of mice that I can't identify, remembering exactly who else lives inside the walls of the Pink Palace. I rarely speak of the Beldam to Coraline but the witch's influence is never far from my mind. To this day it galls me that she was in so much danger when I wasn't here to help.

I'm wearing only underwear and light sleeper shorts. I grab a random shirt and step into my slippers, so that I'm at least somewhat decent to meet the new neighbor. As I creep up the stairs and approach the front door to the attic apartment I hear more sounds of commotion inside, pots and pans being knocked to the floor and more squeaking of mice. Worried that some of Mr. B's prized rodents may be summarily squished to death, I try the knob in a hurry without knocking and fling it open.

"Excuse me!" I half shout, scanning the attic room as I stand in the doorway.

Opening the door I find the college student frantically running around with a broom in her hands, swatting at the ground and shrieking when mice dash across the wooden floor.

She's rather pretty in a bookish way, with long straight brown hair and fashionable glasses perched on a dainty nose. She's wearing a lacy white slip that leaves her arms bare, and comes down to her knees revealing bare feet hopping from foot to foot to avoid contact with the rodents. I would estimate she's in her early twenties, between 20 to 24 somewhere. It's difficult to say for sure because her undecorated face hasn't aged much; I would have thought she was a high school student my own age if not for her height and filled out proportions.

"Excuse me!" I call again, though I lower my head and gaze ostentatiously towards the floor.

"Ahh!" she screams again, though she turns to face the door and sees me. She scurries over to the door, giving up her attempt at extermination to speak with me.

"Those don't look like Mr. B's mice," I declare, glancing up quickly at the pretty young woman.

She still looks flustered even though she isn't jumping and shrieking anymore. "He told me he had taken all the mice with him, but this place is infested!"

"I'm sure he did take all of HIS mice. But you are clearly correct." I think for a second. My sister happens to know a good mauser on a first-name basis. "I might be able to help you clear them out, but I don't think I can do much tonight..."

"I'm willing to give anything a try if I can have a clean place to sleep!"

"Anything is a lot..." I mutter under my breath. "Look, I personally don't know how many mouse holes there are in this place, but I'm willing to bet it's quite a few. I don't think we'd be able to stop them all up quickly."

I look her now more directly in the face while shuffling a bit nervously, noting that she has brown eyes. "I... Let's step outside for a second." I gesture, so that we might get away from the mice that are making her obviously nervous. She joins me out on the balcony without hesitation, eager to be out of the squeaking apartment. I shut the door behind us.

"I'm Clifton, by the way. I don't know if you remember me," I introduce myself, offering her my hand.

The girl tries to smile but it's so weak only the corners of her mouth twitch. "I think so... my name is Petratischkovna Katsufakis. Your mom introduced us when I moved in, but it's a tough name for most people to remember."

She takes my hand and shakes it formally, though her hands are soft and feminine and her grip a little weak. She's slightly taller than me, and her light clothing is causing goosebumps to pop up on her arms despite the summer heat. At night the air can cool down significantly here at the foothills.

"That's... a long name," I agree. "Um, look, I am willing to help you with the mice, but I'll be honest; I think it's a lost cause for the night. You wanna crash at our place?"

"You have an extra bed?" Tish asks.

"Well, no..." I reply, pausing a second for any objection, but when nothing comes press on. "But I'd give you my bed for the evening, I guess. I'll just crash on the couch. Unless you wanted the couch."

I personally can't imagine a girl wanting to sleep on a couch over a bed, but girls are strange sometimes.

"That's awfully nice of you to offer, but I couldn't impose like that, we've barely just met."

I shrug. "True, but you are our neighbor. Besides... I wouldn't want anyone to sleep in a room full of mice." I look over my shoulder, remembering the score or more of rodents I think I glimpsed in corners of the room. "Really, it's no trouble. I'd offer to share my bed with you," I say attempting a flirty joke, "but I kinda figure that's ..." then let that thought trail off on its own. When this

fails to elicit even a nervous chuckle, I immediately think, \_'...Well that was brilliant.'\_

Hoping that I'm not making a further ass of myself by blushing, I try to finish the conversation with at least some kind of positive result. "Seriously, I insist. Come stay the night at our place. Sleep is important and we're both losing it out here."

"Well..." Tish looks conflicted, but really can't see any other choice besides returning to her mice-infested room. "Alright then, I suppose it's the only logical option."

At her request I brave Mr. B's apartment to grab her blanket and housecoat off her bed for her, and accompany Tish back down into the main house. Once we are back inside my house, I hurriedly write my parents a note about our unexpected guest.

"So, couch or bed?" I ask her, as we stand in the living room.

"If you really don't mind giving up your bed?" Tish asks guiltily.

I smile and nod, hoping that indeed the couch won't be too uncomfortable for I too need my sleep. Tish looks slightly uncomfortable about bedding down in strange settings but thankfully I keep my room pretty neat, for a teenage boy. Must be my spartan troll nature asserting itself. Tish lays her blanket out atop my bed and sits down.

"I really do appreciate this," Tish whispers to me in the darkness. "You totally saved my night."

"You are welcome," I tell her with a smile, meaning it. It may not be slaying a dragon or toppling a tyrant, but any chance to rescue a fair maiden feels a least a little but heroic. I neglect to mention it probably helped MY night's sleep too, since her shrieks and stomping and banging would have awoken me as well.

"If you need anything, I'll be on the couch downstairs."

"Okay," she acknowledges, letting me close the door and be on the way. The couch ends up being less comfortable than a bed but serviceable, and I hunker down for the night.

--

I awaken the next morning having slept in a little later than usual thanks to the less than ideal sleep I received. Sunday brunch is being served in the kitchen, and I can tell from the sounds of conversation that Tish has joined the rest of my family. Throwing on some clothes, I join them. Things are pretty lively in there; evidently my parents have each had a full mug of coffee already. My dad has served pancakes instead of omelets to accommodate Tish's vegetarianism, though there's still a plate of bacon available for the rest of us.

"Well if it isn't the knight in shining armor," Coraline teases when she sees I enter the room.

I smile and wave off her good natured comment. Apparently Tish has

been having an engaging conversation with my parents, who are happy to be getting to know their new neighbor. My mother likes her especially, considering her a big improvement over Mr. B. Whatever the topic of conversation was, upon my arrival the subject switches to the mice upstairs and what is to be done with them. Everyone agrees that they need to be cleared out so Tish can live and study in peace, but exterminators can be expensive. The cost would normally fall to Mrs. Lovett (Wybie's grandmother) but Tish is worried that doing so might get her uncle into trouble for breeding mice up there in the first place. I can't exactly share my plan to recruit the services of Wybie's talking cat though, so with a little finesse I shift the conversation towards Tish.

Tish is a history major, with a minor in folklore studies. Having always had an interest in the exotic foods, customs and cultures around the world she naturally developed an appreciation for cultural history. She informs us she is currently an undergraduate but almost finished her curriculum. She's on an exchange program to our city this semester to delve into the colonial and industrial era history our town of Ashland.

After getting a look at the mouse-holes in the light of morning a little later, I think this repair job should be well within my capabilities as a novice handyman. I was going to have to visit Heloise again anyway, so I may as well pick up some tools and supplies to use to patch the holes closed.

I sigh very softly, knowing this work will end up taking a back seat to finding the missing garter. Fortunately my parents seemed to enjoy Tish's company, and if she needed to stay over again it would not be the worst fate in the world.

"What are your plans for the day, Tish?" I ask her conversationally, as we finish the inspection.

"Well I was going to continue my studies. But I guess perhaps I should get some of my books out of here and take them to the library for while, if you have a plan. Otherwise I'll need to start going through the yellow pages to find an exterminator that works cheap."

"I don't think you'll need an exterminator," I say, tromping down the last of the stairs. I'm sure my parents would be happy to hear that too, since they don't want mice finding their way down into the rest of the building either. "I've got a few tricks to try, after patching up the holes. More humane than poison or traps, too."

"That's a relief. Well, here," Tish hands me her house key. "I'm going to change my clothes and gather up my books and notes, then head into town for most of the day. Thanks again. Let me know if you're having trouble though... I'm sure if everyone in the Pink Palace pitched in, an exterminator wouldn't be THAT impossible to afford. Anyway, toodles!"

Tish waves goodbye pleasantly after getting her things and heads into town on her bicycle. Not long after I follow on my motorized scooter (don't laugh, I'll have a motorcycle of my own someday. Small steps). Being Heloise' apprentice I carry keys to the shop and let myself in. The shop is empty of customers, so I head straight into the back rooms where Heloise is waiting for me at her work bench.

"Ah, good. That's what I like about you trolls; you're punctual." Heloise says, looking much healthier and back to her usual fierceness.

"You're looking better." I comment, pleased that her welfare has improved.

"That's not much of an accomplishment. I looked like utter shit yesterday." Heloise does not take compliments easily. "But, what I have for you is an accomplishment. \*\*Behold!\*\*"

Heloise presents me with a little black sphere about the size of a golf ball. It's smooth and polished like glass, but opaque. It has one line around its equator where I can make out a string of small carvings of some symbology I don't recognize, inlaid with a gold foil.

"It's all I could come up with on short notice." Heloise shrugs, handing it to me. "The garter is outfitted with several layers of anti-detection charms. The last thing the wearer would want is to have everyone find out their sexiness is mostly magical. So creating something that can detect the garter was not easy."

"If you get within five feet of the garter, the stone will get hot and start buzzing. The closer you get, the stronger the heat and vibrations will become." Heloise explains. A silence hangs for a moment in the air, and she shrugs again. "That's it. I used my best stealth enchantments on the garter so anything more direct than that will get spoofed."

"It will be a huge help," I declare, reaching tentatively out to touch the sphere. "Is it very sturdy? I don't envision bouncing it, but I want to know how rough I can be while carrying it..."

"It's a rock, but I still wouldn't go dropping it against the pavement. If the ring around the edge gets chipped, it'll be useless."

I look around the shop for a small protective cloth bag or something to carry it in. Meanwhile I start to question Heloise. "There's a bunch I'd like to know. First, the garter: It's a female garment but can it be worn and used by any species of female? Does it ONLY operate when worn by a female, or could a male use it?"

Finding a suitable protective carrying bag, I wrap the item and put it safely in my pocket. Then I sit in a nearby chair and pay close attention to her every answer, making sure to memorize these facts.

"Any female that can wear it can use it," Heloise replies, looking askance as she considers my line of inquiry. "So you can rule out any suspects with no legs." I allow only the tiniest of smiles to grace my lips. Heloise rarely shows her legs, but it's nice to know she still has some underneath her almost ever-present work robe. "I guess a male COULD wear it," she continues, "but the magic would enhance his feminine side, so... it would only be useful for fags and dandies, not men trying to pick up ladies."

"That answers my second question." Inwardly I chuckle at Heloise for

using the word 'fag.' Nockers are famous for their foul mouths, but I still get giggly when I hear it coming from such an outwardly sweet little lady as my boss.

"Is the magic of the garment passive or active? Does it require a spell to activate or some form of energy to engage? If it is active, how long do the effects last and can they be interrupted?"

"No, it's passive. As long as she's wearing it the garter will do its job. It needs to be able to last all day and all night. Can't have a wardrobe malfunction in the middle of a wedding now can we?" she smiles a little evilly at that thought.

"True. So it won't ever fade down for a time. Can it be interrupted and if so by what from what distance?"

"Well you could yank it off her legs."

I blink at that, but before I can continue, she back jumps in. "Oh!" Heloise starts, remembering. "And it's dry-clean ONLY. ...Not machine washable. Getting it soaking wet will mess it up."

"Speaking of yanking it off, that's brings up another question. How intense are the effects? Can the girl increase the sexual attractiveness if she desires? I mean, is a guy suddenly going to be unable to contain himself if she crawls into his lap?"

"It enhances the natural beauty of the wearer. It won't make you see something that isn't there, but it'll be hard to look away. The magic of the garter will attack the self-control of its targets several different ways; if you just stand there staring, it'll start shoving dirty daydreams into your head about the wearer. If she talks to you, you'll find it almost impossible to resist the first request she makes. If she touches you, the holly-balm will go to work getting you immediately stiff. If she sings, it'll be impossible to look or move away from the room."

Heloise grabs a stack of blueprints sitting on her workbench, all the designs for the garter she worked on. "It goes on and on. I dropped almost all of the commission money on the individual charms I hammered into the thing. As long as the girl wearing it knows a couple of man-snaring moves of her own, she should be able to set off a dozen love-cantrips."

"Impressive," I comment, looking over the blueprints with her. I memorize as much of them as I can, not that my memory is particularly amazing. "Is there anything I could use to make myself immune to its effects?"

"Castration." Heloise shrugs. "I don't design my weapons to be easily defended against."

"Eugh!" I wince. "O...okay. Next questions. Who ordered the item?"

"Viscount Apartakis, the self-styled troll king of our little city," Heloise answers, and the name vaguely rings a bell. The Viscount was some kind of war hero, once upon a time, which probably earned him his noble title. You can only get so far without being one of the sidhe though, no matter how many monsters you slay. His mortal self

is a well-to-do businessman as well, having invested heavily in cellphone technology before the explosion of smartphones in the last decade. Sort of a banal trade for a changeling to get into, but I guess when you get older you have to make some concessions to human life.

"It's not for him, of course. It's for his daughter. Part of a dowry or something."

"Who is she?"

"Lady Idunna. It's overkill if you ask me. If you get a look at her you'll wonder if she really needed it in the first place. But then, the sidhe are nothing if not obsessed with their appearance."

I nod. The sidhe are born with an innate, unearthly beauty and graceâ€¦ but that doesn't mean they aren't interested in being the most beautiful and graceful in a room full of their peers. Any little advantage would be valuable. They also tend to be extravagant with money, as most are nobles or at the least comfortably wealthy. No doubt Idunna would have been well taken care of in the Viscount's household, even if he is a troll. "I take it the order was a secret one for her. I doubt her daddy would have advertised it's construction, for obvious reasons..." I muse, thinking aloud. "But that doesn't rule out someone else wanting to deprive her of it."

"Yeah," Heloise confirms. "The only ones that knew about the order her were the two of them, myself, and now you. But my suppliers might have had an inkling of what I was building from the parts I was buying. And I have no idea if either of the clients might have let something stupid slip out when they were bragging to their friends at court."

"Oh," I say, my face falling a bit. "That complicates things. I hadn't thought of them blabbing about it." I pause for a few seconds looking at the floor before continuing. "This may be beyond your knowing, but can you think of anyone in particular who would want the garment? Any girl who would want to wear it?" I ask, pausing. "...Or any rival inventor who would want to take it and sell it themselves, or merely tarnish your name and cause you trouble?"

"Oh, I think **\*\*any\*\*** girl would want to wear it if they had any interest in boys. It's really more of a question of who might want it so bad that they'd risk **\*\*MY WRATH!\*\***" Heloise raises her fist and shakes it for a moment, her eyes burning with violent thoughts. Eventually she snorts a puff of smoke out her nostrils and lets the anger subside. "I don't have any rival inventors in the area. (I destroyed them all.) But anyone could make some bucks if they fenced it."

This isn't eliminating a lot of suspects or turning up any easy motivations, but perhaps thing will be clearer if I knew all the local personalities that might have had the opportunity to do the deed. "I think I might need to attend a social gathering with the sidhe during this search. Do you know how I might be able to get into their next party?"

"I'm not really the social type," Heloise admits, thinking hard. "That party I went to was an outstanding invite I had hung onto for

three years before cashing it in." She ponders a moment, rubbing her round little chin. "I might know one person with the kind of social pull to get you in. I'll look into that."

I think what I'll need to do is to start creating a timeline of just what happened that night. "When exactly did the party you went to occur? When exactly did you arrive? Can you remember or tell me who was there, and who you talked to?"

"It was two nights ago now, and I showed up at about 9 o'clock. I was wearing the garter so I was getting A LOT of attention. I talked and I drank and I flirted and men brought me drinks and girls stared daggers at me..."

Heloise thinks hard, trying to remember anyone she recognized.

"Well there was that asshole Goat from the trailer park. I have no idea how a redcap like him got inside the party. Then again, he might have been wondering how a foul-mouthed nocker like me got invited. He kept hitting on me and wouldn't take no for an answer. I still hadn't gotten the hang of directing the garter's magic away from someone..."

"There were sluagh there too, that was weird. The one that owns the Dweezwold place, Madame Misery and her daughters. They didn't look like they were there for a party."

I nod, taking care to remember these names. "What's Goat's name, if you know?"

"His real name?" Heloise shrugs. "Who knows."

I shake my head, not yet recognizing the person or recalling them to memory. "Did you steal the affections of any of the ladies' paramours or was there any altercation with a particular female? I mean something serious, not just a few moments flirting..."

"I'd be willing to bet I was catching stares from every married and unmarried man there. I didn't get into any fights though... that I can remember. The wine there is strong stuff." She tilts her head in thought. "The last thing I do remember is a few sidhe ladies-in-waiting helping me to the bathroom when I started to get the spins. I don't know how much longer I lasted after that but around that point is when my brain shut down for the night. I guess that would have been around midnight."

"Hmm..." I rumble. "You say Madame Misery and her daughters were there. Are we on good terms with them at all? Sluagh can be remarkably well informed."

"Yeah, but they are a secretive bunch too. I was surprised to see them creep out from under their rocks long enough to socialize with the rest of the world." From her description it doesn't sound like Heloise is very friendly with the Sluagh at all. Personally, I've never met them.

"They could be an asset," I think aloud. "Whether they were there to party or not, they are fairly observant and in my opinion somewhat unlikely to have stolen from you, though I'm not ruling it out. They might have less reason to be bothered by your stealing the spotlight

in the party, and since they don't party very hard they might have been sober enough to remember much of what happened."

"I only have a bit more to ask." I continue, "First, do you think you got laid at the party, at all?"

Heloise shoots me a glare for asking such a personal question.

"Pfft!" I sputter and immediately apologize. "Sorry! I'm- I'm not trying to pry. I'm just gathering any information I think might be useful. I mean, if someone guy did ... err, get his hands on you, he might have kept the garter as a trophy, even if he didn't go all the way."

Heloise' expression softens partially, but she still glares at the floor unhappily. "I was only there trying to hook up with my Jimmy. But he obviously wasn't there, or the garter would have snagged'im," Heloise says humorlessly. "Anyone else, \_like Goat\_, can get bent."

I raise my hands in a placating gesture. "Well, that's it for my questions, though I did think of possibly one more thing you \_could\_ try to that might help you remember more of what happened after the wine really hit you."

I shift a little uneasily on the chair. "\_Buuut\_ I'm not sure you'll want to or have time."

"...?" Heloise arches an eyebrow.

"\_Weeeelllll\_ studies show that getting drunk again can sometimes jog your memory from during the time you can't remember during the last point of drunkenness..." I tell her with a bit of unease.

"Ha! Studies. What do they know... \_about faerie wine\_?"

"True, but I'm willing to bet there's still alcohol in faerie wine," I reply.

"Oh are you now? And what makes you so confident in that, my young apprentice?"

Knowing I've been caught in my own ignorance, I fess up quickly. "Brash ignorance of my own ignorance," I reply with a tinge of embarrassment. I've barely even had my first human beer, I'm far from an expert on drinking.

Heloise grins at my admission, but quickly sobers again. "...But yeah, after that hangover I swore an oath not to drink again until the ice caps melt."

I nod. "I'd actually be a little worried to see you drunk again. I would hate to see your limited inhibitions against violence dropped." Trying to buoy her spirits I add a nervous laugh, and to my surprise Heloise actually chuckles with me, the first real mirth I've seen since she lost the garter.

"...ahhhhh, violence," she finishes after the humor passes.

With my questions wrapping up, I ask, "Heloise, how can I contact you in Miseryville if I need to?"

"Just leave me a note here in my workshop," she advises. "It's best not to disturb me when I'm at home."

"Right, that brings me to the question about your trod." I shift a fraction, feeling the very question might be a bit foolish, let alone the reason behind it. "I'm not sure it would be useful or necessary but if I had to use it, is that okay? I mean... unless it drops into your bedroom or something."

"Into my garage actually," the diminutive blonde answers quickly. "I don't appreciate people dropping in unannounced though. I mean if it is life or death that's one thing, but I don't see a reason to start giving out the keys to my home just to... \_wait\_, why do you even want to get into my house?"

"Well, I don't, not exactly. I'm just asking permission in case I had to, so you wouldn't cuss my ass off when I showed up. Don't worry. I won't visit you unless it's a real emergency."

"I only cuss out the ones I love," Heloise jokes, sharply pinching my cheek followed by an affectionately gentle slap to the face. "If I'm in Miseryville it'll be because I don't want to be disturbed, but you're welcome to try. If you can figure out how to open my trod on your own, I'll consider that a remarkable display of my teaching having sunken through that thick troll skull of yours."

"Thanks for reminding me" I reply while knocking my knuckles against my skull. "Anyway, that's all of my questions. I'm planning to go visit Madame Misery and her daughters first, I think. I'm gonna write up a formal request to drop by, introduce myself, and have a chat."

Heloise nods, agreeing with my avenue of investigation, and her only advice is, "Don't get in their debt."

"Thanks. I'm gonna try to find some antiques or items of nostalgic value to maybe barter with. I don't suppose you've got any juicy info or secrets you think they'd be interested in trading for?"

"I'm pretty private. I prefer to keep my secrets to myself," Heloise answers, shifting her legs uncomfortably beneath the concealing skirt of her robes. "And I don't have much time for nostalgia. We nockers tend to focus on new creations, not dwelling on the past."

"But that is a good tactic to take." Heloise continues, bouncing her head minutely in approval at the idea, making her single large dirty blonde ponytail bounce cutely. "There are plenty of people in this town with secrets, and everyone hangs on to something from their past. What I wonder is if a seelie like you will be able to part them from their treasured keepsakes?"

"Maybe. I tend to treasure people, not objects."

With my interview with Heloise completed for the moment, she makes eye contact with me for a second and nods, before heading on her way. I pay very close attention when she uses her trod and returns to Miseryville, but her flowing robe conceals any useful details from

me. With my mentor departed, I get started on thinking up a suitable interesting, formal, and polite letter to deliver to Madame Misery and her daughters.

### 3. Chapter 3: A Meeting Most Auspicious

**\*\*Book One: Theft of the Garter**

**>Chapter 3: A Meeting Most Auspicious<strong>**

With my interview with Heloise completed for the moment, she makes eye contact with me for a second and nods, before heading on her way. I pay very close attention when she uses her trod. With my mentor departed, I take some time to think up a suitable interesting, formal, and polite letter to deliver to Madame Misery and her daughters.

Not knowing much of Sluagh and their ways, I have only second-hand stories and rumors to go on. Spirits of fear and terror native to Russia, or so I'm told, one would expect them to be as creepy and unnerving as their legends imply. I've never met one in person but most of the kithain assume they've been watched or spied on by the crawler folk at least once. Despite their fearsome reputation I've heard that they are actually quite insistent about proper etiquette and formality, with a fondness for anachronistic fashion and tastes. This won't be a regular 'Hello. How do you do?' greeting. Not only must it be handwritten but it must be on good paper and ink, and carefully worded.

In the workshop area of the store there is a small desk, primarily used by Heloise on those rare occasions she needs to address a client of nobility. While most of our stationery is boring modern day eight-and-a-half by eleven type we do keep a small supply of genuine parchment. It's yellowed with age and perfect for calligraphy.

I retrieve a piece of the old fashioned sheets, take up a quill and ink pot, and attempt to sit down. I have stoop myself into the desk, and I'm sure I'm making a fool of myself by cramming my way into a chair intended for a woman who is half my height. With focused strokes of the pen and being careful not to smudge the ink, I compose the letter. Here, I am more mindful than normal of politeness and try to throw in some extra-flowery language. It's not really my forte so I decide I had better lay it on thick in order to make a positive impression. More is better, right? A few drafts later, the semi-glossy reddish-black ink is drying on the sallow paper and it reads thus:

To Madame Misery and her daughters:

Greetings. My name is Rax, also known as Clifton Jones. I hope this letter finds you well.

I write to make a request of your ladyships, for I seek the pleasures of your company. We have not yet become formally acquainted, and thus I would like to take this time to present myself to you in the interest of fostering good relations between us. I am but an untried apprentice to the craftswoman Heloise of Miseryville. My skill with the wrench outstrips my skill with a blade, yet I am noble of intent and set on a quest of great import. I doth seek that which grants the comely maidens their power to ensnare the hearts of men and boys

alike. Your presence at the gala held at Castle Sapphire not but two nights ago has convinced me to petition you for your aid.

If you find yourself agreeable to my plea, then I shall be ready to meet with you at your first convenience. I will be prepared to meet any price you should require. If the morrow is too quick then by all means send a missive to me at the enclosed address with details of a more fortuitous time for you. I would appreciate your discretion in the delivery of the message, as I live amidst mortals who should not be robbed of the privilege of their own ignorance.

I await your reply, and humbly thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Squire Rax

After it is done, I leave the shop, locking it behind me, and ride my scooter towards the Sluagh's place. Even though Heloise and I hadn't had any direct contact with them, Madame Misery was still a perfunctory of the local Seelie Court and thus the location of her home was well know: The foreboding and forbidden Dweezwold Manor.

The sun has already set by the time I leave Heloise's shop, and when I reach the Dweezwold place the sky is dimly lit by a crescent moon nearly obscured by drifting cloud cover. The scant starlight makes it a little difficult to see where I am going down these streets; a couple of blocks from my destination I notice that 90% of the street lights are broken or burned out.

At last I find Dweezwold, the home of the city's family of Sluagh. The looming old house would already have seemed spooky and intimidating to a mortal, but in the Dreaming it takes on an altogether sinister appearance. The cracked upper windows faintly glow with an inner fire, and give me the impression of a gigantic face on the house that watches I approach.

I ride my scooter very slowly along now, not wanting to hit anything in the dim red light of sunset. Coasting to a stop in front of the place, I look up the walking path to their front door. There is no gate barring my path. If I am brave enough, I can approach the porch and the front door.

I find myself a little fearful of the house, and the dark area in general. But I've come this far and time is important. I take a few deep breaths, my senses on high alert, and my few useful getaway spells ready on my tongue. Sliding off the scooter I stand up straight and stride up to the doorway with as much confidence as I can muster. I try not to show any fear, expecting that I'm very likely being watched by someone or something, and deliver my letter posthaste.

By all appearances there are no signs of life here, and I might have believed the place abandoned and condemned. The house itself faintly creaks and groans like a living thing in even the slight wind. Dropping the letter in, the brass slot snaps shut after I withdraw my hand. Not wanting to linger in this place as the darkness settles in further, I get back on my scooter and hurry away, my eyes darting

over my shoulder frequently.

\* \* \*

><p>Home again, and the hours grow later. At home my family life is mostly what I'd expect for a quiet Sunday evening. My are parents watching TV, while Coraline tries to read one of Tish's history books as the older girl continues her studying at the kitchen table. Glad to be back in my well lit home, I greet the girls. I explain to Tish that I haven't had time to deal with the mice yet, and Coraline generously agrees to let me bunk with her for a little bit rather than face another night on the couch.<p>

There's not too much time left before bed, so I only have a short while to socialize with Coraline and the others before everyone starts to turn in for the night. I am just getting a few things out of my room, before Tish takes it over for the night, when a shrill meowing catches my attention. I look around for the source, checking the window, hopes rising at whom the sound might herald.

Peering through the open window panel, I spot a black cat strutting across the edge of the first-level rooftop. Being a cloudy night it's not easy to see the feline, but another whining yowl pinpoints it just before the cat hops down off the roof and out of sight.

I rush to window and throw it open, calling. "Wait, please come back, cat!"

There is no reaction to my calls, so I scurry outside to try to follow him. Stepping out onto my porch in a hurry, it takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness. I am almost convinced I have missed the chance when another feline growl a little up the hill turns my attention in the right direction. The body of the black cat is impossible to see at night, but the reflection of the house lights shine in the cat's eyes like bright green jewels.

"Cat!" I call louder. "Cat, please come back. I wish to speak with you about mice."

I tromp off through the light vegetation, my eyes sharp enough to avoid the trees but not always able to keep me from stomping through the ferns and shrubs at my knees. I spot the green eyes a few more times, keeping me on track when I feel like I would have lost them. With the determination common to all trolls I press on as long as I have a vague idea that the cat is in front of me.

"Alright," I mutter to myself. "I am going to start carrying a flashlight from now on. I'm done with total darkness..."

While my quarry may be leading me somewhere, I have no idea where it is. Sometime later, when I lose sight of the cat again and am unsure which direction to go, it also dawns on me that I am not sure which direction the Pink Palace is either. Without some light I cannot recognize the trees or landscape here, and am rather lost.

"Aw crap..." I mutter to myself. "Seriously, gonna start carrying a big flashlight."

Very displeased, I stop for a second, looking for any landmarks that might tell me which direction home is. As I whirl about in confusion

I am again confronted by that pair of luminous green eyes. They appear larger than before... and they come closer. Though there is still scant light filtering through the woods, I soon see that the eyes don't belong to a cat at all, but a teenage girl!

She's about 5'3 and slender, perhaps a little underfed but still keeping curves in the right places. Her skin appears pale in the evening light, and her hair is black and cut short except for two locks of bangs that frame the sides of her pretty face. She wears no makeup and her mouth and nose are small, her large green eyes and long eyelashes dominating her features. She wears simple black shorts and a white tank top, with a satchel slung over one shoulder. As she moves cautiously closer a few more details come into focus; a lacy blood red choker around her neck, and a flash of some gold jewelry hanging from it over her clavicle.

If I had to guess, I'd say she was fairly close to my age, give or take a year.

"Hello," I bid her.

For some reason her appearance puts me at slight ease. She clearly isn't sneaking up on me, and that's always a good sign. She smiles, flashing white teeth at me in lieu of a greeting. She keeps moving, but is no longer approaching me directly; she makes a slow circle around me, keeping her back to the woods that she hangs at the edge of.

My ease gives way to puzzlement. "Um..."

My immediate urge is to ask her if she knows the way back to my home, but I'm not sure I want to advertise I'm lost just yet. "My name is Clifton," I introduce myself, thinking perhaps that is the best way to begin any new relationship. I'm struggling to remember a good icebreaker, the kind they teach you to use at a party.

"Good evening Clifton. Nice night for a stroll in the woods?" she asks, though the weather isn't exactly ideal for anyone without a flashlight. Compared to last night the wind has made it chilly for August. Not even the fireflies are out tonight.

"I'm looking for a cat actually. I was following him, \_buuut\_... I appear to have become a bit lost." I pause, tilting my head to look at her. "I don't suppose I could ask for your name, and possibly directions back to old pink house around these parts, if you know the way?"

She tilts her head to match mine, looking me eye to eye at the angle I have chosen.

"You could ask, but I'm not feeling very chatty tonight. I think I may have said too much already," She answers, but goes on talking anyway. "As it happens I was looking for a certain cat as well, and I had almost caught him. You must have frightened him off."

Despite her accusation the girl doesn't look all that perturbed. More mildly amused than anything. Finally standing in one place for a minute she reaches into her satchel and pulls out a small violin and bow, though on her small frame it fits in her arm fairly well. "Would you care for a song?"

I am suddenly a bit wary, having heard all sorts of stories about beguiling creatures in the woods leading men off to their doom. I wish I had thought to pay a bit more attention to the details of those cautionary tales, but at the moment I am drawing a blank. besides, it would be rude to refuse.

"If you are freely offering."

"The first one's always free," she says, and draws her bow across the strings, producing a sharp note. More follow, rapidly building into a simple but pleasant folksy sort of tune. "I'll offer you some free advice as well. Give up your quest for the garter your master created. It'll only bring pain if you find it."

This thoroughly unexpected news makes me blink and my eyebrows arch in surprise. "May I ask how you know this?"

"I don't know, may you?" she smirks, teasing me for my formality. Her violin strings produce a burst of short notes like titters of mocking laughter.

"How do you know this?" I repeat a bit gruffly, dropping the formality. Experimentally I tilt my head the other way, still looking at her, and comment softly, "That's a nice tune."

The girl tilts her head to match mine again, even though with the violin at her neck she has to twist her entire torso to do so. Nevertheless her body is quite gymnastic, and she continues playing with no apparent discomfort from her contorted spine. She finishes a couple bars of music before she answers.

"Well it's two parts observation, one part soothsaying and just a dash of female intuition. I get invited to all the best parties you know, and the last one I was at I just happened to overhear some interesting things."

"\_Oohh\_," I coo with interest, and several questions pop into my head. "Are you much of a party girl? You've got me quite curious now..." I pause and then add for clarity, "...about your information."

"Well curiosity never killed anyone," she giggles. "But I wouldn't call myself a party girl really. I never throw them, and I rarely accept the invitations I get. But I'm glad I went to Friday night's little soiree. For one thing I got to see a nocker acting like a drunken slut, which is a spectacle I highly doubt I'll ever get to see again."

"I am a bit envious. I would have liked to see that."

She plays on her fiddle a little longer, then interrupts herself again. "So, will you agree to give up trying to find the garter?"

"Why do you care?" I ask, now striking on a good question. I finally straighten my head back the other way, working a sudden crick out of my neck.

"Oh I don't care at all. I'm asking on behalf of a very close friend

of mine," she replies with a few plucks of the violin strings.

"A close friend?" I blurt out, not wanting to lose that point of information.

"Oh my, I didn't realize these woods had an echo."

"You are quite a tease," I inform her. I produce a frown to show her I don't appreciate being made to look stupid, but in truth I'm enjoying the attention from a flirtatious girl. Still, there's a mystery to be solved. "Who is your friend?"

"I'll tell you if you agree to give up your search..." Her gaze with her large eyes is fixed on me, never moving. "What's more, I'll tell you my name. And I'll lead you back to your home, too. And if you're really nice I'll even get rid of your mouse problem!"

"I'm not about to just give up on my quest because you asked. I only just started it yesterday! Besides, apart from leading me home, none of those favors are all that valuable to me."

"How about I suck your cock?" she offers boldly, her feline eyes challenging mine to meet her gaze. Her lewdness has so shaken me for the moment that I blink first, averting my sight, and this only spurs her on further. She slides in closer, delighting in teasing me, and licks her pouty lips with exaggerated sultriness. "Oh, that sound more valuable? A little sucky-sucky?"

"...!?" I jerk in surprise. "...seriously? Um look, you're pretty and I ... I could get to like you but I don't even know your name and..." I stutter a bit as I look her up and down. She is pretty, and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't tempting. But oaths are not something to be taken lightly, especially for a troll.

"Bahahaha!" she blurts out suddenly, the music ending with a sharp screech. "I wasn't being serious, you doofus. C'mon, I'm not that kind of girl! You should know me better than that."

Before I can tell her that I really don't know her at all she comes sauntering across my path, locking eyes with me quite unafraid of my size and strength. "If you won't listen to me without knowing who you're talking to, then I suppose I have no choice but to introduce myself. I am the Doom Kitty."

As she brushes past me, intentionally shoving her shoulder against my side, I look down and notice a thin black cat's tail protruding from her shorts, previously hidden behind her back. Now that she's right next to me I can see a pair of fuzzy black cat ears projecting from her scalp as well.

"Hello. It is, uh, a pleasure to meet you," I tell her slowly, still feeling a tad startled. "I'm still listening," I add, not wanting her to leave.

"If you won't believe me, then go about your quest. A little pooka like me can't stop you. But soon enough, you'll see I was right," she asserts, and strikes her bow across the strings of her instrument.

"Uh... your friend... I-I don't care that the garter was stolen, or

who has it. I simply need it back by the end of the month," I tell her, wondering if perhaps her friend has it or knows someone who does. I turn to face her again now that she is behind me, and I scratch my head. "Were you the cat at my window?" I ask abruptly.

"No, of course not. Don't you know anything about pooka? We don't go creeping around at people's windows like common perverts," she scoffs, sticking her nose up as though offended. "We hold ourselves to a higher standard of creeping than **that**."

"Indeed," I reply, not sure I really understand her answer. "You are the first Pooka I've actually met."

"Then I hope I've lived up to all your expectations."

"I didn't expect you to offer a blowjob," I mumble, still reeling a little from that joke. "Look, I don't see why your friend should care if I stop my search. Your advice is awfully cryptic."

"I don't need to stand around having the good name of my soothsaying skills dragged through the mud! If we can't work out a deal, fine. Perhaps it will be enough to leave you lost in the woods instead. Goodbye."

She huffs an indignant puff of breath and walks off at a casual pace into the woods, still playing her violin softly.

As she leaves, I sigh deeply. "I don't suppose I could offer you anything else in exchange for guidance home?"

She stops and turns a sly smirk at me. "There's the enthusiastic response I was looking for!"

In response, I incline my head up in wariness, though a smile pricks at the corners of my lips. She keeps on down the path she was already headed on, her tail beckoning me to follow her. The music on her violin picks up into a happier tune. I smile and gladly begin follow her. Now that the situation is less serious, I grant myself a chance to let my eyes wander to her rump with its swishing tail as we walk.

"Pray tell, have you visited the one who commissioned the garter yet?" she calls back.

"I have not, Doom," I reply. "I can call you Doom, right? Or would you prefer Kitty? Personally the latter is a bit more cute and playful, befitting a pooka if you ask me."

Her bum is small but not unattractive, rather typical for a sixteen year old girl who gets a fair bit of exercise. The tail emerges right where it meets the small of her back, pushing the rear of the shorts low enough to expose a little too much bony butt cheek to be polite.

"The latter will get you fewer stares in a crowd," she answers my question. She glances casually over her shoulder and catches me checking out her ass. "And it's just awful getting stared at."

"Sorry," I mutter, embarrassed. "It's justâ€¦ you have a lovely tail and backside, Kitty."

Her tail twitches and curls, making it hard to look away from her swaying derriere. "Such wretched compliments. Go ahead and look again if it'll inspire you to do better."

Ironically I raise my head up, focusing instead on her slender feminine back and shoulders as we walk. Now that she's called attention to it I can't just ogle her, even after being invited to. I consider what next to say to her, and how much I can trust her. As far as I know she intends to see the garter stay lost, so I really shouldn't be expecting any kindness from her. But it sure would be nice to come up with something cool to say.

"I was planning on speaking with some others to gather information before I approached the client," I answer to her question, finally.

"You're probably right," she continues, agreeing with me far too readily. "Speaking to the client won't hold any clues at all."

She rolls her hips and sways a bit, causing her tail to gently lash from side to side. "Totally unimportant," she adds, punctuating the remark with a sharp tail twitch as she brings it back to the center.

"I was planning to speak with Madame Misery and her daughters first," I inform her. "I know they were at the party, and if you want information the slough are some of the best for it."

"Oh yes, and they give it out so freely too," she declares with a chuckle. "Enjoy their hospitality."

"Ha. Yes," I laugh back, rather enjoying the walk and conversation now. She's a rather sarcastic girl but at least I'm starting to pick up on that, some of the time anyway. "I'm trying to find some things to barter with in exchange. I may not enjoy it, but at least I can endure it."

"Let's hope so."

Since I am pointedly avoiding letting my gaze rest upon Kitty's rump, I keep looking around in search of any recognizable landmarks. I want to know when I am nearing the Pink Palace. Meanwhile I now try to get a straight answer from the animalistic girl. "Kitty... do you... \_want\_ to see the garter returned to my mistress in time?"

She slows her pace and soon stops. She turns and studies my face a moment, testing my powers of comprehension.

"A warning," she answers at length. "A warning delivered and my task is finished, and we have no more reason to be around one another." Her eyes drift from my face and slowly creep down my chest, and Doom Kitty steps up to my side and places her palm upon my ribs. "Asking me questions is fruitless, I have no answers. Only distractions." Her voice grows softer as she inches in closer, and I'm frozen to the spot. I can feel her warm breath against my neck now and I don't even care what she's saying, as long as the tickle of her words against my skin continues. Her lips are a whisper away from my jaw now. "But

you're resolute in your goals. Not someone who can be distracted."

"Was that clear enough?" she asks, her tail twitching a few times in what I assume is mild annoyance. She pushes away from me with her hand against my belly, forcing me to huff out a breath I'd been holding.

I swallow and can't help but peer after her in bewilderment. What was \_that?\_ I think over her words a few times in my head and conclude... that she's still confusing. I must be seriously missing something here. Her words are one thing, but her body language and \_intensity\_ on the other hand... That all seems quite clear.

She looks at me a second longer and then turns around and we trudge on. After a moment or two of silence, I speak again. "I think I like you, Kitty, even though you're quite a puzzle" I declare as we go, and then add in a musing tone. "I hope that isn't dangerous..."

"I have 'Doom' in my name for a very good reason," she remarks flippantly, her smile returning.

The mood lightening again, I continue. "If um... if you want to help me search, however you like, I would welcome it." Meanwhile I've returned to ogling her ass; I had her permission, and now the courage to do something with it.

She shakes her head. "You trolls are so thick. I think you'll have an easier time understanding me when I meow."

She glances over her shoulder and I'm fairly certain she notices my ogling again. "I hardly ever come out this way," she says, rolling her hips slightly and curling her tail once more across her rump. "but if you left a bowl of milk out I might drop in for a chat from time to time."

"Oh. Well you can count on that then."

As we are nearing the upper hills above the Pink Palace, I grow bold enough to actually try putting 'the moves' on her. I'm not very experienced with the fairer sex but she's been throwing enough signals my way, mixed through her cryptic nonsense speak. Isn't this how all the best locker room stories started? It's now or never.

"Can barely see anything," I complain loudly, pretend to stumble, and lurch forward to grab Kitty's backside with both hands. It's just as pert and soft as I had imagined.

"\_Mrreeoooww\_!"

Doom spins away from me and gives me a quick hiss. She slowly calms, and continues to glare testily at me. "Didn't you mother ever teach you not to pet wild animals?" she demands, her irritation evident.

Her glare ruffles my confidence a fraction, but after a second I try to roll with it. "You never said you were wild."

"I also never said it was okay to grope me," she counters, "At least

not that hard."

I cough, suddenly embarrassed. "Hrm, uh, sorry. I... kind of thought we were..." I cough again, and look down a bit. "You are tricky to read... Kitty."

She rubs her rump with both hands, while her glare gradually softens into a milder annoyed roll of her eyes.

"There, now THAT was finally a decent compliment."

All my bravado has evaporated in the wake of this failure, and I'm left grasping for words to salvage the situation somehow. Kitty takes notice and gives me a pitying sigh, cocks her hip and shakes a finger at me. "When you learn how to be gentle you can start at the ears, and maybe earn tail-touching privileges later."

I smile, and turn to look down the hill. I can clearly see lights of the Pink Palace from where we are. "Thank you, Kitty."

Sensing the mood is right for me to leave and nothing else, I give her a small wave in the darkness and start slowly down the hill, knowing she is watching me. "Remember what I didn't say!" she reminds me as I leave.

For a few seconds, there is the faint rustling of the foliage underfoot as she leaves. Within a handful of seconds she is gone from sight and the sound goes with her, leaving behind only a few gently waving tree branches marking her passage. I stare after the way she went for a half moment, disappointed at my haste with her, but nonetheless quite pleased to have met such an interesting girl.

"I've always liked cats," I speak lowly to myself.

As I make my descent I find myself wondering at her last remark. She didn't say why she wanted me to halt my investigation. She didn't say what her grudge was against Heloise. She didn't say her friend's name. In fact, getting hers was an effort. For as much as she spoke, she didn't actually say much.

As I reach the Pink Palace I pause to notice that the van from yesterday is parked out front again, and the lights in front of their basement door are on. Even from up here I can hear the sounds of swing music, numerous young female voices chatting over each other and the barking of a few scottish terriers. It's obvious they're having a party, one at which Lu and probably a dozen other hot young dancing girls are attending. I wish I had an invitationâ€¦ I could crash it, but after the embarrassment I suffered in front of Doom Kitty tonight my self-doubt gets the better of me. Clearly my seduction skills are not up to snuff just yet. Instead I stare wistfully down the stairwell at the lights and music and voices that filter up from the basement, wishing that I was old enough to slide into the party scene and impress the crowd of beautiful girls down there.

Instead I sneak back into my house. It's late, and the rest of the house has gone to bed, so I creep upstairs and finish getting ready for sleep. Slinking into Coraline's room I find her sleeping, but as I climb into bed the sudden shift in weight that my mass on the

mattress causes wakes her up.

"...hhh. Cliff? Where were you?" she whispers, her eyes heavy with sleep.

"Lost in the woods," I reply as I snuggle in under the covers. "I met another fae, a pooka this time, and learned some interesting, and slightly mysterious, things."

She blinks sleepily, interested but only half awake. "A pooka? What did they say?"

"Lots of thingsâ€¦ she mostly just teased me for being obtuse."

"Don't worry about that, pooka never mean what they say," Coraline mutters sleepily, brushing it off and rolling over to go back to sleep.

"Huh? What do you mean by that?"

"Do you not know what a pooka is? They're shapeshifters. Animal spirits. And they have this tic, like a curse, they're all compulsive liars. They can't ever make a statement that's totally, one hundred percent true."

"...oh," I breathe, and Coraline falls silent. She falls asleep quickly, but I'm more awake than ever. All of Doom Kitty's cryptically phrased words rush back to me, carrying new meaning if I can only puzzle it out. My poor tired brain turns her sentences over looking for the lies to turn into truths. So she was the cat at my window! And there are clues to be had by investigating Heloise's clientâ€¦ and, and-

And I missed a freely offered blowjob!

"Dammit!"

"Go to **\*\*sleep\*\*** Cliff!"

End  
file.